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Research Article

Paul Gilroy*

Agonistic Belonging: The Banality of Good, the “Alt Right” and the Need for Sympathy

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Abstract: This paper considers aspects of the rise of neo-fascist political sentiment across Europe. It suggests that an appropriate political response to those developments must involve a reconsideration of the politics of sympathy which is seen as essential in the formation of solidarity.

Keywords: anti-racism, compassion, nationalism, humanism, Alt Right, nostalgia, proteophobia, Fanon, Améry

Some years ago, taking a cue from the writing of Jean Améry, the great Fanonian survivor of the Auschwitz lagers, I began to argue that the black settlers, postcolonial peoples and refugees in Europe should try both to assume and to contest European identity. I wondered whether Europe's national, regional and religious identities might be transformed by a strategic repositioning. Perhaps those habits could be altered for the better by the *agonistic* attachment of settler populations to the idea of Europe which would have to be reworked to include the inescapable fact of its creole future. Answering the sometimes-violent racism that has blocked the liberating right to be seen to belong, those gestures of attachment would also involve seeking ways to bond subaltern, postcolonial and migrant histories with larger critical narratives of blacks and non-Europeans located in a reconceptualised modernity that extended beyond Europe's imperially-expanded geo-body.

These provocations would not only encompass contributions to widespread struggles against racism and racial hierarchy. They would assist with the production of a counter-history of Europe that stretched back into the time before Europe became Europe out of the ashes of Christendom. Today, Europa's Phoenician parentage has been forgotten, but we should always remember that she was the daughter of Agenor, the king of Tyre.

This hopeful strategy necessitated an adjustment in historical perspective. It demanded a comprehensive re-thinking of the brutal market-activity in human beings that had made coffee, sugar, chocolate and tea, not to mention new forms of banking and insurance, familiar, even essential, elements in the common European habitus. It would be extremely difficult to implement, but it might be justified by the long-term benefits of unambiguous admission into Europe's official sense of itself. Acknowledging that their cultural plurality could not be reversed would alter European democracies. The associated critique of racism and racial orders would be a way to promote richer conceptions of citizenship and rights, resistant to even the most informal kinds of colour-coding and exclusion.

Since 2001, the chance of that transformative intervention has been blocked and slowed by the effects of conducting counter-insurgency warfare on an unprecedented, planetary scale. Governments everywhere in Europe have buckled under pressure from the growth of ultra-nationalist and neo-fascist movements with and without immediate electoral ambitions. What project Frontex and the Schengen agreement have done for Europe's fortified physical space, resurgent racism and nationalism have accomplished for its

*Corresponding author: Paul Gilroy, Department of English Language and Literature, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, E-mail: paul.gilroy@kcl.ac.uk

emergent cultural space. New technology has increased the tempo of racist mobilisation and fostered closer links between growing neo-fascist forces everywhere (Singer and Brooking).

The forms of racism in which the idea of cultural and ethnic difference replaced earlier, simpler notions of biological hierarchy, have been enhanced by the idea that a clash of civilisations is currently underway. The global “war on terror” identified new enemies beyond the Manichaean architecture of the Cold War and promoted a decisive cultural turn. That momentum created a vicious circle. The global counterinsurgency displaced people who became refugees. They sought hospitality in unwelcoming locations where their very presence was judged not only to be alien but also to be invasive. Europe’s incomers and their locally-born descendants effectively became an “enemy within.” In response to these risks, security came gradually to dominate all other government functions.

These dismal developments have contributed to the consolidation of the genre of political speech that Mahmood Mamdani described as “culture talk.” His term refers us not to the departed, Cold War world of conflicting ideologies, but to a shadowy land of nebulous values which can, in an instant, solidify into iconic cyphers of cultural difference that are considered unbridgeable and absolute. That ossified difference is imagined, just as it was during the nineteenth century, to be natural and geopolitical. Of course, there are significant generational variations in the degree of attachment to the idea of race. That enthusiasm fluctuates with linguistic, regional and historical divisions as well as the reach of US technologies that have exported their racial habits to the rest of the world.

A curiously backwards-looking and comforting conception of culture is invoked to make this new xenology legitimate. The key to grasping its power is the realisation that from the nostalgic angle of vision it promotes, cultural diversity is always a risk. Conceived in opposition to lofty civilisation, lowly culture is mostly what minorities have. It blocks their assimilation but supplies them with a coveted ontological anchor that can keep them steady amidst the storms of austerity which now menace their innocent, if resentful, hosts.¹ The accommodation of plurality with peaceful coexistence becomes unthinkable, as does the practical reconciliation of social solidarity with cultural diversity. Those key terms “plurality” and “diversity” are usually just polite code words for racialised variation.

The resulting xenology has been configured by distinctive conceptions of political theology and political time. They aspire to the nation’s restoration and repossession and dictate that incomers constitute a security problem which we are obliged to recognise in strongly gendered forms. The male refugee becomes the “rape-fugee” who endangers white womanhood. The clothing worn by the covered women who accompany him is the disturbing avatar for the proteophobic anxieties of the indigenes (Bauman 162). The re-written governmental conventions of the *secure* national state dictate that a stable polity can only ever comfortably accommodate psychopolitical mono-culture: invariant and immobile yet apparently, in testing contemporary conditions, endowed with solidarising, involutionary power.

These assumptions specify an optimal relationship between frozen culture and fixed nationality that has other negative consequences. The way that people from and maintain the social groups to which they imagine they belong, is presented as the result of an essential disposition to associate positively only with those who are seen as *already* like themselves. This tendency towards sameness is likely to be grounded vogueishly in neuropsychology or genomics. Whatever its supposedly scientific foundations, it overwhelms all other social processes. In the context of contemporary European securitocracy, it combines readily with culturalist nationalism and xenophobia to create a toxic mixture. That blend has proved especially potent whenever politicians—from a variety of ideological directions—strive to recode the populist instincts to which the yearning for identity as sameness remains captive. Nationality, ethnicity and white victimage supply convenient watchwords for all the clustering that is required in order to feel both safe and secure.

Solidified and instrumentalised in this way, culture gets insulated from the stimulus of history, from everyday interaction and from social creativity. In that simplified form, it is amenable to being disciplined from above. National and racial groupings are thereby invited to possess their own exclusive culture: the

¹ See Vron Ware’s “Towards a Sociology of Resentment: A Debate on Class and Whiteness.” The song “Roots” by the left-wing, British folk duo, *A Show of Hands*, displayed this aspect in all its horror and was annexed by the British National Party as a result. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/apr/23/british-folk-music>

inert object that is imagined to distinguish them from others. They are required to hold on to it as if it was a form of property. It may be dry and lifeless, but this antique and absolute thing can also be enthralling. Melancholically cast both as heritage and prospective nostalgia (Boym), it reduces citizens to a transient, intermediate presence in the longer story of the nation's unique political ontology. Group character is maintained in simple, functional harmony with the ecologies of belonging that supposedly distinguish Europe's authentic, rooted nationalities from each other, as well as from aliens, itinerants and interlopers.

The dominance of this style of thought comprises a small but telling part of the de-politicising mechanism that inflates and amplifies contemporary culture-talk in the setting provided by officially endorsed fantasies of civilizational antagonism. Its repetition conveys securitocracy's version of geopolitics as a cultural conflict defined by the blending of race, ethnicity and religion into a single gestalt.

The “Alt Right” and the Re-Branding of Fascism

The name “alt right” was not coined by antifascists. It was chosen as a means to accomplish new political goals, by its enthusiasts and advocates: the proponents of the newest, combative varieties ultranationalism and racism. The term refers to a loose international alliance or informal coalition that is well-funded and enjoys access to the highest levels of power. The grouping is technologically sophisticated and has assembled an elusive command of political and psychological communication via the libidinal and affective aspects of new technology in general, and social media in particular.²

This wholesale rebranding of a generic fascism was carefully constructed to maximise the effects of computer mediation. Operating effectively online since 2015, the “alt right” and its various allies: the identitarians, the alt light, the neo-reactionaries and the old neo-Nazis, white supremacists and anti-semites, have projected a view of their activities no longer as radical evil, but as daring, transgressive, comic, ironic and futuristic. Even when supplemented by a contingent of disorientated imitators,³ these authoritarians have been able to summon up seductive images of the utopia that guides their pragmatic political choices. Their anti-racist opponents have yet to find an adequate answer (Goldhill).

Most commentators agree that the world this alliance seeks to build will be racially pure. It will rest squarely upon the revival of natural relations between men and women that have lately been distorted by feminism, and it will be dedicated to the preservation of the embattled west which is threatened in particular by demographic changes arising from the excessive fertility of non-white incomers. A residual echo of a much older racism insists that the West is menaced by the shadowy corporate forces of “international Jewry” (O'Brien). The term Muslim has been secured ambiguously as a racial rather than a religious trope. The anti-Semitic foundations of contemporary racism are recycled in anxious commentary on the specific varieties of corruption introduced by Islam and the treacherous, “cultural Marxists” who use it as a Trojan horse (Nagle, “What the Alt-right is Really All About”). There is much more to say about each of the bloc's constitutive elements and about the roles of race-thinking, xenology and culture-talk in their mutual articulation, but that detailed survey must await another occasion.

Scholarly and political opinion is deeply divided about how to evaluate the threats they present. When discussing fascist ideas, there is always a danger that critics end up taking them more seriously than their adherents do. Further difficulties arise because, so far, a lot of the critical analysis of this movement has been conducted online. Angela Nagle's book *Kill All Normies* is a useful if limited primer (Poulter). The theoretical and historical framing of that work is underdeveloped. The resulting limitations can be compensated for by drawing upon the valuable insights such as those supplied by the German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, whose recent succession of short books has proved illuminating both as an ethico-political inquiry and as a provocative treatment of the contemporary media ecologies on which this movement has relied for amplification and legitimacy.

² See Mike Wendling's *Alt Right: From 4chan to the White House*.

³ Primo Levi draws attention to the tense relationship between fascists and their imitators at the end of his final book *The Drowned and The Saved*.

Han's work establishes that we have moved decisively beyond the firmly analog, mass-cultural world that defined the limits of propaganda in the era dominated by Freud's notorious double nephew, Edward Bernays (Tye). He suggests that we are being delivered quietly into the clutches of algorithmic political culture and predictive analytics which have made human behaviour predictable for the first time (Han, *In the Swarm*). That epochal change demands a more elaborate understanding of the relationship between information, communication and power than anything that Machiavelli, Foucault and their various successors have been able to provide.⁴

The intellectual origins of the alt right lie in a dizzyingly wide range of revolutionary-conservative and fascist thinkers. Its own advocates cite the influences of Oswald Spengler, Henry Mencken, Julius Evola, Ludwig Von Mises, Hans Hermann-Hoppe and the individualist libertarian Murray Rothbard. In the US context, the movement's caste of organic intellectuals has acknowledged the influence of the "paleoconservatives" who revised the emphasis placed by neoconservatives on foreign policy. It is also claimed that the French New Right have supplied an important source of inspiration (Bokhari and Yiannopoulos).

The movement draws heavily upon the commercial and technological clout of self-styled "neoreactionaries" who boast of extensive connections in Silicon Valley. Other contributors favour the accelerationist, neo-fascist and occult, semi-academic critics of bourgeois democracy and equality who have grown weary of indicting the hollow liberal pieties that maintain the official, institutional structures of power. This vocal substrate draws upon the dubious legacies of thinkers like Georges Bataille and Carl Schmitt as well as a techno-orientalist sublime discovered in the exciting possibility that states will be shrunk down to minimal proportions and run as corporations with the aid of AI technology. This "neo-cameralist" dream is larded with a gleeful anti-humanism and a fervent racism now routinely and blandly re-described as "human biodiversity" and "ethno-nationalism." The would-be Magi of the movement are led online by the failed academic philosopher Nick Land (Haider) and others who have, in turn, been influenced by "Mencius Moldbug," a prominent techno-fogey who draws inspiration from some of the more obscure works penned by Victorian England's theorists of imperial domination and has been lauded for it by President Trump (Noys). The poetics of H. P. Lovecraft are combined with deep-ecological fantasies to form a loudly-trumpeted "dark enlightenment."

How all this is connected to Trump's presidency also needs to be discussed in depth. His electoral campaign was a watershed because it gave a stamp of approval to the previously unspeakable nostrums of the racist, neofascist and ultra-nationalist right. As a result, a Trump-centred argument about the character of this movement may be both attractive and easy, but it is not very useful. It tends to reinstate a simpler, stabler moral and political environment that should be regarded with suspicion in the fluid communicative ecology we inhabit.

The links between the old right and the emergent alt right are still either inchoate or brittle. Some fellow travellers oppose Islam vociferously but are likely to shrink from the openly anti-semitic chanting, automatic weapons and flaming torches that were beamed around the world from the Summer 2017 rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina. Not all the gamers, ironists and trolls who found a precious quantum of community on the 4-Chan board (all doubtless habituated to a "beta-male" existence in the basement of the parental home) want to be allied with the gun-toting belligerents and irony-free rituals of the red-state militia-atti.

New fodder for the movement is being provided by a youthful, proselytising cohort of influential Youtubers, bloggers and vloggers drawn from across the world. In Britain, we find Paul Joseph Watson and the Scot Millennial Woes. They are allied with the Swede Henrik Palmgren, the Canadian Lauren Southern, Lana Lokteff and even the gamer, Pew-Die-Pie. These actors may, in future, be amenable to commercial pressures from the platforms they rely on to reach their numerous subscribers. They are likely to be tested further by divisions arising from the movement's lack of unanimity with regard to gender relations. Similarly, the appeal of US' fake news information warriors like Alex Jones may be limited by the parochialism of their

⁴ See also David Patrikarakos's *War In 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in The Twenty-First-Century* and James Williams's *Stand out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*.

discourse which, its love of metaphysical and generic whiteness aside, has translation problems in places where firearms are less popular as indices of political liberty and race war seems more remote than it does in the USA.

The English journalist Carole Cadwalladr has shown how, as it feeds a political movement with an unprecedented transnational topography, the technological infrastructure of this network raises a host of juridical and legal problems for sovereign national states. Though the machinery is still unevenly developed and deployed, have no doubt that the alt right are ahead in gaming the Facebook and Google algorithms that place authoritative and emotionally-charged propaganda repeatedly on the screens of the vulnerable minority that can affect the outcome of electoral processes by being open to changing its mind. Theresa Hong, a key practitioner responsible for scripting Trump’s Facebook posts during his electoral campaign, suggests that his tech advisors have written a new psychographical playbook for electoral campaigning which their political opponents have yet to even understand.⁵ In Europe, the damage being done to democratic political culture is far from only electoral. The centre of political gravity is being shifted to the right, and what is considered respectable and responsible political conduct has been redefined.

It is worth repeating that all of these forces intersect in and rely upon the political ontology of race. They oppose political correctness and multiculturalism and use the disputed issue of free speech relentlessly to alter the limits of what can be said publicly, but those are secondary issues. This racial momentum will not be arrested by the tactics used in the past to fight back against its predecessors. The alt right leadership style themselves as Gramscians and Leninists (Nagle, *Kill All Normies* 53; Kilpatrick 14). They intend to play a long game. They have begun to make nests inside elite educational establishments such as my old place of employment, the London School of Economics (Barnes).

The professional news media has been particularly inept at educating itself about the specific dangers posed by illiberal political forces that aim to grow their movement by lying and dissembling. The mainstream has not worked out how to handle these seductive, racist voices without amplifying them and increasing their reach. The attention economy that frames these public encounters makes shocking and provocative statements much more valuable than quiet and sober reflection. In the epoch of “fake news,” the truth content of statements is therefore irrelevant most of the time. Other considerations are much more significant.

The legacies of fascism now arrive in our lives from so many different directions simultaneously that the concept has lost much of the analytical, political and moral weight that it acquired in the later twentieth century. The concept of racism has also fallen into disrepute as a result of overuse and trivialisation. Today’s would-be anti-racists generally prefer a vocabulary exported from the USA and centred on deliberately jarring terms like antiblackness and decoloniality. Routine activist chatter about black and brown bodies, the premium to be placed upon self-care, and the duty to develop intersectional approaches, suggests that the poetry of social transformation has been flattened out and the agenda of liberation curtailed by a disregard for language that is associated with unbridled enthusiasm for generic forms of identity. Communicative rationality is being squeezed so that it can fit the minimal space provided by soundbites and hashtags, tweets and memes, likes and follows. Political sentiment is hostage to narcissism and nihilism.

An essentially *docile*, computer-mediated solidarity may be becoming the norm for activists, but new digital links arise with the transmission of spectacular horrors and the mainstreamed choreography of black resistance. Those network technologies often create nothing more than the mirage of a movement. On screen, racism, capitalism and militarism appear intractable, overwhelming. Off-screen, large-scale mobilisations can occur swiftly but are likely to evaporate just as fast. In the universe of time-line media, a click here and “like” there may secure the requisite hit of dopamine, but they leave an ailing world essentially untouched.⁶ Meanwhile, the structural inequalities that derive from institutional racism stagnate or appear to worsen. Giving voice to alternative and oppositional ways of living and thinking becomes progressively more difficult. Fatigue, frustration and anxiety take hold. The black radical tradition

⁵ http://content.blubrry.com/mycampaigncoach/Theresa_Hong_Interview-8_2_17_12_31_AM.mp3 (accessed 2nd September 2018)

⁶ See Marcus Gilroy Ware’s *Filling the Void* and James Bridle’s *New Dark Age*.

is routinely invoked, especially by its north American custodians, but it is usually a depthless inventory. History retreats to become a mere backstory, sparsely populated by sparkling, celebrity icons: a deified Audrey Lorde, a messianic James Baldwin. These problems are compounded by attempts to revive analyses and strategies that were produced to operate only in one remote set of circumstances and fail to retain any purchase in contemporary historical, political and cultural conditions.

Refugees and the Politics of Human Salvage

The recent UNHCR annual report showed that our planet boasts 65 million displaced people. Millions of refugees have arrived in Europe. Thousands more have died en route. In 2018, the data suggested that the number of fatalities occurring in transit had declined while the proportion of travellers at risk of death was rising sharply.

A higher proportion of people are dying at sea, with one death for every 18 persons who arrived in Europe via the central Mediterranean route between January and July this year (2018) compared to one death for every 42 in the same period in 2017. (UNHCR)

This history of maritime flight foregrounds the varying value assigned to supposedly different varieties of human life. It can, therefore, be made to resonate with the earlier forced movement of Africans into the reified condition of enslaved negroes: the human fuel that catalysed the modern economic magic of European capitalism. At the contemporary end of the same historical arc, we find Africans, Afghanis, Iraqis, Syrians and others fleeing war and climate change. They are now likely to be represented as waste people—human waste—that inhabits an attenuated middle passage: contained, encamped and lodged in spaces of exception that may be inside but are more often found beyond the reach of national states. Those zones are inhabited by displaced people considered as denizens rather than citizens. Their inhabitants are hostage to the contingencies of loosely-regulated local authorities and NGOs that, despite their name, are an integral part of the neoliberal governmental apparatus: charitable, outsourced and sub-subcontracted.

If these fugitives reach Europe, the patterns of segregation and conflict that await them do not straightforwardly reproduce the US patterns that were rooted in the nomos of continental slavery. In London, the horrors of Grenfell Tower revealed that a different segregation can operate more by wealth than by racial hierarchy alone. The radical geographer, Danny Dorling has for example shown that Britain's spatial division is often more vertical than it is horizontal. Updated conceptions of class antagonism and racialised inequality are urgently required if we are to comprehend these variations.

Cut Britain up horizontally rather than by neighbourhood, and you do find minority-majority areas. For example above the fifth floor of all housing in England and Wales, a minority of children are white. Most children growing up in the tower blocks of London and Birmingham—the majority of children “living in the sky” in Britain—are black. (Dorling)⁷

Humanity Compassion and Life in Common

In many parts of Europe, political opinion has expressed compassion for the plight of incoming refugees and asylum seekers. Those responses are fragile, but it is important to appreciate that there have been many generous and humane responses to what is often only remote suffering. Those humane gestures coexist in complex ways with patterns of nationalist, racist and xenophobic hatred as well as resentments, anxieties and fears rooted in the idea that displaced people represent contagion and the contamination or corruption of previously pure and peaceful places.

The discrepancy between antipathy and sympathy is now conventionally measured on the imagined bodies of women. The relative and relational analysis of women's subordination and the integrity of feminist

⁷ See also, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: *State of the English Cities A Research Study*, Volume 2.

responses to the sex/gender arrangements of incomers have become significant questions. We cannot assume that we will agree about how they should be understood. Since the 2016 New Year’s Eve events in Cologne, the image of Asian and African men motivated by their desire to enact gross forms of violence on local white women, has become yet again a focal point for popular loathing of racialised foreigners in general and Muslims in particular. Their cultures, so we are told, are uniquely repressed, violent and sexually incontinent. How these stories are presented in the media, and the history of this intersectional menace in the activities of white-supremacist organisations are both germane to their contemporary power in the context of obsessive, absolutist talk about cultural difference.

In spite of the relentless charge of the racist and ultra-nationalist right, there are significant residues of ordinary decency. Everywhere we look, alongside the fear and resentment that punctuate the space between terrorist attacks, we discover extensive local organizing and dynamic solidarity enacted in the names of hospitality and common humanity as well as a strong desire, evident in many places, to work around expanding police power and the strictures of ruthless, high-tech securitocracy. There have been moves afoot for civil society organisations to pressurize but also to bypass government power, opposing racism and xenophobia in order to build a culture of hospitality and supportive, independent, vernacular connections with fugitives, incomers and settlers via the work of dedicated non-governmental bodies like Refugee Support as well as less formal and more fluid local coalitions and activist bodies. In the context provided by the steady ebbing of religious morality and the drift towards what the Norwegian mass murderer, Anders Brevik called “cultural Christianity.” These ethical gestures are an important part of the making of a post-secular morality centred on empathy, mutuality and generous openness to alterity. Nobody knows how long this interlude will last.

In 2017, I stood in my own neighbourhood in the aftermath of a terrorist attack watching a spontaneous groundswell of mutuality, reciprocity and togetherness while listening to those feelings of empathy being dismissed contemptuously as “white guilt” by a few young activists based elsewhere who happened to be standing close by. They had come to express their solidarity, but they did not know our area and its history. However, they felt sufficiently confident—they would probably say “empowered”—to sneer and pour scorn on the public outpouring of sympathy that transgressed every threshold of identity politics. Those paranoid responses masquerade today as sophisticated varieties of radicalism.

Of course—as we’ve seen in France—the nature of Europe’s ongoing political emergency means that many people abandon the trials of sympathy and prefer to renounce their hard-won liberties in pursuit of enhanced security. It is not clear at this point whether the networks aimed at support for refugees and undocumented incomers will be sufficient to withstand the mechanisms of criminalisation that have begun to be directed against them.

These contradictory responses appear in polities deeply divided by urgent pleas for the accommodation of cultural difference and what we might loosely call anti-racist demands for human recognition and the presumption of equal dignity. The variety of recognition being sought in emergency conditions, close to spaces of death like Grenfell Tower or in the waters off the Libyan coast, is not of a familiar philosophical variety. Charles Taylor and the others who have adapted the old approaches of Kant and Hegel have often presented recognition through a primary concern with the maintenance of dignified individual particularity—in Taylor’s terms, “authenticity.” That problem is considered only in the setting provided by liberal democracy and is often either over-identified with impossible demands for tolerance or, in the difficult translation into discussions of group rights, misconstrued as an infinite, recursive relativism.

The desire to be recognised as a human being, against the strictures of ethnic absolutism and racism, does not boil down to political conversation that can be defined by its fluent command of group identity specified according to the habits previously based upon acknowledgement of individual selfhood under eighteenth-century Europe’s rules. This desire for the illusive state of “equal dignity” operates as part of a plea for recognition not as culturally specific but as vitally and corporeally human. That demand becomes different because it is articulated *explicitly* against the forbidding specifications and structural effects of racial hierarchy. The resulting pleas are by no means always directed, nomophilically towards the attainment of rights. They appear routinely in circumstances where the acknowledgement of humanity has either been withheld or is explicitly denied, where the passage towards inclusion in species life, has

been closed off by the invocation of “Man” in race-friendly, anthropological hierarchies. The bans or other exclusionary mechanisms evident in those arrangements refer us immediately and violently to the contested limits of political communities that have been built or stratified according to the incorrigible facticity of race. Whether race is figured as natural history, as culture or as political anatomy, institutionalised racism imagines and assembles it as an absolute, division in social and political life. Human and inhuman can, it seems, always be distinguished if not by nature then by the equally formidable signatures of culture and ethnicity.

These are considered vulgar and even disruptive points to raise in polite, scholarly company. Analysis of racism is almost always ruled out of serious discussion either because its history remains deeply discomfiting and has therefore been firmly repressed, or because, where its legitimacy is conceded, it can only be appreciated retrospectively and gets relegated to the past.

From that perspective, racism is considered to be over and done with. It tells Europe what it was and is no longer. If racism is discovered still to be active, its residual significance is accepted only within a narrow band of postcolonial locations, not least of which is the political and economic archive of Europe’s modern expansion across the Atlantic.

I want to suggest, against that popular viewpoint, that racism remains a more significant, even a constitutive aspect, of European history. It has travelled, mutated and grown from its enlightenment roots in the same intellectual soil that yielded the idea of essential human equality but which, we should always remember, provided no significant obstacles to the exterministic consolidation of European colonies and empires. The undoing of those governmental and economic systems was a largely unacknowledged element in the creation of the EU as a political and commercial unit.⁸

The intertwined histories of race and empire, colonies and decolonisation can still furnish us with valuable analytic tools with which to come to terms with modern Europe’s democratic promise as well as its limitations and pathologies. We can employ some of those resources to begin to explain how today’s dismissal of vulnerable people as vermin by the influential commentators who have urged military responses to their encroachment on European sovereign territory, has become part of a powerful, popular politics in so many different national states.

The desperate, unwanted incomers who have been targeted for that violent treatment can sometimes be grudgingly admitted into the most abstract grouping of humankind. They are assigned to lower orders of existence where the problems presented by their alien attributes can be managed anthropologically as expressions of racial, ethnic and cultural difference that belong elsewhere. I am oversimplifying here. We should acknowledge significant regional and cultural variations in the intensity of attachment to race, to the norm of whiteness and to religious or ethical habits that might qualify them. The degree of humanity identified in or awarded to Europe’s others fluctuates and consequently determines the quality of sympathy and/or empathy that will be expressed once the veil of alterity has been torn to reveal, unexpectedly, a needy, vulnerable human countenance beneath. That epiphany has become a more complex event because the scale upon which humanity can be imagined and encountered has been changed by the expansion of digital infrastructure. Those shocking discovery of the Other’s humanity has usually been conveyed through *visual* engagement that reorganises distance and modifies the degree of intimacy involved in becoming present to each other. And yet, against what Fanon identified as the intensity of epidermalisation and its racial corporeal schema, something like a “real dialectic between ... [the] body and the world” (Fanon 112) can begin, unanticipated, to reassert itself in the politics of sympathy.

Once the epidermalised body has been perceived as the primary object of racial hierarchy, the significance of consciousness is overtaken by violent, corrective attention to the shifting significance of corporeality. At that point, ontology itself becomes a historical and social phenomenon, and thus, despite its eternal, fixed appearance, the unstable equilibrium of the racial corporeal schema can be overthrown. It will be upset and even undone if our reassertions of the “real dialectic between the body and the world” are sufficiently tenacious.

⁸ See Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson’s *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*.

Antiracism Today

In Britain, diversity management imported from the corporate world has supplied government with an attractive yardstick for measuring the modernisation of key institutions. This is especially important now that nobody—not even the most committed and ideological of white supremacists—wants to admit to being a racist. The Finsbury Park terror attacker, the murderer of Jo Cox MP, even Tommy Robinson, the erstwhile leader of the EDL and UK Pegida, have all denied that they are, personally racist. This is the flimsy substance of the “alt” in the “alt-right.”

The fact that the number of unabashed and enthusiastic racists seems to have declined is one of the biggest changes to have occurred during the last few decades. The near disappearance of these pariahs needs to be accounted for historically and in a detailed way—a detour that I cannot accomplish here. It relates to the history of antiracist sentiment in popular culture, to a transition between political generations, to the after-effects of Rock Against Racism, punk and rave culture as well as to the conviviality that both derived from and remade Britain’s class dynamics as well as its gender relations.

To cut a long and complex story short, that precious outcome was what we used to call “multiculturalism” until use of that rather helpful concept was shut out from serious scholarship and demonstrably “grown up” political conversation. Proposing its rehabilitation here, requires me to make clear that I refer not to narrow, ideological or professional specifications of cultural plurality, but to the lived, sensuous practice of people disposed, generously and honestly to try and manage the conflicts that inevitably arise between them by making better communication, better translation and richer forms of mutuality, especially those based upon affinity, gender, neighbourhood, sexuality, age, common passions and shared interests rather than on violence, imagined unanimity and the comforting prescriptions ethnic absolutism.

The lack of proud, unabashed racists creates other problems which come into focus when we consider the difficulties involved in identifying and categorising racist and fascist discourse, rhetoric and argumentation. We learned painfully from the voluminous writings of the mass murderer, Anders Brevik, that it was possible to be an anti-Semite who enthused over the state of Israel. Today, neofascist movements all promote their black and brown membership as the proof that they have embarked upon a new, post-racial chapter. Tommy Robinson leads these developments with his sincere-sounding declarations that he is offended by homophobia and anti-Semitism. He warrants his opposition to Islam with a question we hear all too frequently these days resounding across the swampy, no man’s land of fading distinctions between Left and Right. “How’s it racist to oppose a fascist ideology?” he inquires innocently, winking at the swelling legions of homo-nationalists, the liberal mainstream and a sizeable contingent of feminists against fundamentalism. Readers of his autobiographical book, *Enemy of The State*, have had to interpret his exaggerated, but in many ways convincing, versions of the time-worn “some of my best mates are black” line of justification (Robinson 153).

The politics of race is evolving, and we must adapt our understanding to take its transformation into account. It corresponds in many ways to the resurgent discourse of individual uplift that has won wide appeal in a neoliberal environment where the inability to succeed in life gets regularly explained as a personal failing rather than a structural matter. In a supposedly “postracial” society, being unable to achieve wealth, status and security is frequently imagined to result from individual failure to develop the correct aspirations, resilience, standards and values.

The general intensification of inequality that has been lately evident can thus be re-interpreted. As its deeper causes remain inaccessible, inequality’s cultural manifestations provide straightforward targets for political intervention. Operating only on an interpersonal scale, rising inequality can be discounted as a result either of personal prejudice by gatekeepers or of personal failure by applicants for admission to the escalator upwards into the corporate redoubt.

Antiracism and the Politics of Sympathy

Several years ago the notorious photograph of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi's corpse on the sand at the water's edge was a landmark event in a larger spectacle of war, flight, desperation and suffering. The politics of attention is relevant again here because this history includes the growing agency of governments in the ever-closer management of what can and cannot be seen by their citizens. In several settings, the same contested visibility has become politically significant. The orchestration of emotions and the scripting of affect are now intrinsic to the moulding of popular opinion in decaying public spheres haunted by trolls and the spectre of fake news. Whether tight control over the politics of the image and the spectacle can be sustained in the age of camera-phones fuelled by African minerals, is in our hands, or rather in our pockets.

What seems more important than those epochal changes is the fact that among radicals and what is left of the Left, the ideas of empathy and sympathy have been allowed to sink into disrepute. This trend seems to be particularly evident among academics—whose moral and political perspectives in the era after critique, tend to reject what Hannah Arendt described as the politics of pity and have been tempered instead by the effects of the anti-humanist training bequeathed to them by the second half of the twentieth century.

One of Britain's most celebrated feminist scholars seemed to speak for a disoriented generation when her busy Twitter feed dismissed sympathy altogether as an "imperialist notion." On the other hand, in a televised Christmas message to the British people, Abdullah Kurdi, the grieving father of the children whose bodies had so eventfully been washed ashore on Turkey's Aegean coast, pleaded for "just a little bit of sympathy from you." That request asked his audience to consider whether it is possible to develop solidarity without sympathy or to build an anti-racist movement without any prospect of empathic repair (Gobodo Madikizela). In the meantime, we need to know how hostility to sympathy came to be so widespread among avowed radicals that it could function as a measure of their interpretative sophistication and ethical probity? Even if compassion serves the psychic needs of the remote observer of the horrors that result from decisions taken by our unrestrainable governments, are its practical results necessarily tainted when they touch the victims and offer them shelter, sustenance and warmth?

This discussion has a long history that became inextricably entangled with the racial divisions that resulted from colonial and imperial statecraft as well as the politics of print and oppositional publishing during the nineteenth-century movements to abolish slavery and protect indigenous peoples from genocide (Wood). But there is more at stake than the just scale upon which moral and political judgements are to be made. Near or far, close or distant. The geometry of suffering is not a Euclidean phenomenon.

Before and after the colonial period, struggles against racism and racial hierarchy have contributed directly and consistently to contested conceptions of the human. They valorised forms of humanity that were not amenable to colour-coding and complicated the understanding of human sameness and species being, of life in common.

So, against the argument conventionally made by those who believe that racial tolerance and human fellow feeling are insubstantial things in the face of underlying and untamable natural differences that favour evolutionary mechanisms like the uneven distribution of trust between members of various racial groups or hostile responses to the phenotype of the other, I want to identify the battle against racism in ethics, epistemology and political ontology as of fundamental concern.

That battle involves more than the recalibration of the concept of recognition and its supplementation by the idea of relationality. It has a bearing upon the prospect of encountering humanity outside of or beyond its racial figurations, though not in its post-human forms. The Jamaican Sylvia Wynter is one of several postcolonial thinkers who, working with a palette of Fanonian concepts, have spoken of the need for a re-engagement with the human after the death of man. We are not yet postracial, but we need ideas of what a world shorn of racial hierarchy and inequality will be like if we are to sustain our movement and not become disoriented in the face of the challenge posed by the "alt-right."

Struggles against racism have sometimes been utopian in character, yet they have shaped a distinctive philosophical perspective. It is rooted in the fragile universals and radical interdependency that first came into focus on the insurgent edges of colonial contact zones where the brutality of racialised statecraft

was repudiated, and cosmopolitan varieties of care and conviviality unexpectedly took shape across the boundaries of culture, civilisation, language and technology.

This type of response should be sharply differentiated from the armoured humanitarianism that currently dominates our geopolitical environment. It can be traced into the nineteenth century where, alongside the resistance offered against colonial power by indigenous peoples, we encounter critics of the colonial enterprise who operated from inside the colonisers’ own national states. There were dissenters, protesters and other advocates for the humanity and the liberty of colonised peoples. Sometimes they articulated what we can still recognise today as an antiracist politics. Their opposition to the racial order of empires was often, though by no means exclusively, a religious reaction which recognised imperialism and colonialism to be fundamentally belligerent and therefore opened into a broader advocacy for the cause of *peace*. At other times, there was a close association with Feminist politics premised upon the interconnection of all systems of oppression and on the potential unity of all oppressed and exploited peoples.

If we wish to understand the dead spots in the rickety structure of the *liberal* humanitarian tradition, and if we wish to make sense of the recurrence of its old weaknesses which have been apparent to critics for a very long time, if we want to restore socialism and feminism or to salvage the Left, there is no choice now but to turn our attention towards the problems of racism, raciology and racial hierarchy. This is to be done not because it exhausts the inventory of humankind’s moral failure, but because that necessary confrontation can provide important critical resources from which a richer grasp of humanity might be assembled and a new reparative project conceived.

We must be able critically to analyse the practical institutionalisation of race hierarchy in governmental power and prepared to understand its complex articulation both to nationalist thought and to the political and juridical architecture of national states.

The slaves from many different places who were exchanged for guns, rum, cloth, salt cod and other commodities and currencies recoiled from their own brutal reification. They became, as Fanon put it, objects among other objects, human commodities circulating among other commodities in a new, oceanic economy governed by unprecedented legal and procedural instruments. We should know by now that their various descendants inside and outside the fortifications of overdevelopment have inherited elements of the slaves’ irreducibly modern predicament, not least of which was their vulnerability.

Not long ago, a British prime minister referred to the Mediterranean refugees huddled in what we’d been told to call their “Jungle” settlement at Calais, as “a swarm.” This was a further sign of the salience of the struggle over the human I have been trying to identify. David Cameron glossed his rhetorical choice by saying:

I was not intending to dehumanise, I don’t think it does dehumanise people. Look at what Britain’s response has been. We have made sure that we sent the Royal Navy flagship to the Mediterranean which has rescued thousands of people, saved thousands of lives. Britain’s aid budget is helping to stabilise the countries from which these (migrants) have come.⁹

Cameron’s dog-whistled projection was inflected by earlier racist discourses that had been aimed at incoming, post-1945 black settlers and, in the late nineteenth century, at fugitive Jews. However, the hyperbolic presentation of those drowning refugees as an elemental, existential threat to our way of life was so peculiar, so neurotic and so duplicitous that it demanded uncomfortable answers to the question of what the civilisation Cameron and company had vowed to defend might actually entail. That civilisation is not, in fact, a European or Christian phenomenon but a narrowly national affair. It coincides only with the archipelagic body of the United Kingdom.

The rampart of the sea has done its historic work. The “Wogs” do, after all, begin at Calais, and as the vote against membership demonstrated, the misguided efforts of the EU are themselves constructed as an alien, de-civilising influence, levering boatloads of menacing jihadis into no-longer-Great Britain’s formerly quiet and peaceful islands. This nationalist myopia is bound to conflict with the planetary risks of biomedical catastrophe and the menace of climate-change which, as the seas rise, can be expected entirely

⁹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11804861/David-Cameron-says-describing-migrants-as-a-swarm-wasnt-dehumanising.html> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33716501>

to redraw the familiar parameters of economic life and political interests.

I hope that as we encounter those conditions, a resurgent antiracism will help to generate a cautious, post-humanist humanism capable of grasping multispecies relationships between human and nonhuman. If successful, this will be distinguishable from other, previous varieties of humanism by being made, as Aimé Césaire put it while contemplating the wreckage and waste of world war two, “to the measure of the world” (Césaire 56). That fragile alternative is today as precious as it is elusive. My hope is that it can be excavated from the unique conceptual space in which combative antiracist humanism has repeatedly confronted colonialism, racism and nationalism.

That contested location can be triangulated in various ways. Efforts to map it must include the cruel rhetoric of the various Fascists who denounced their victims as vermin in order to make them easier to exterminate. From there, it is only a short hop towards the idiotic white supremacy calculatedly voiced by populist political leaders in the form of racist common-sense: as hateful as it is gleeful.

So, in the spirit of humanism’s re-enchantment, let us seek a different perspective on the trials of European culture than the angles of vision offered to us by Farage, Wilders, Le Pen, Petry, Hopkins, Halla-aho, Orban, Åkesson, and their ilk. In other words, let us try to see whether that civilisation has been able to sustain and maintain itself or whether we are now condemned only to a choice between different varieties of barbarism. Opportunities for an experiment in the banality of good are all around us.

In conclusion, I will explore one of them briefly. I have spent the last couple of years collecting and comparing contemporary tales of drowning and shipwreck. I want to turn not to the many moving stories of heroic action at sea that might serve briefly to affirm the epiphany of a new humanism born from the challenges of maritime rescue and salvage, but to a related, much sadder case of Pateh Sabally, a twenty-one-year-old refugee from Gambia who committed suicide by drowning himself in Venice’s Grand Canal in January 2017. That very public death was investigated by magistrates after a videotape of it was placed online. It was notable because it had been watched and recorded by a sizable crowd composed of locals and tourists from outside Italy. Some of that crowd were said to have been jeering at him as he drowned and making derogatory, anti-immigrant comments. One spectator was, for example, heard shouting the word “Africa.”

Sabally was not the survivor of a wrecked ship. He had ended up at the Italian port of Pozzallo two years earlier after the overloaded boat that had carried him from Africa was intercepted by the authorities. The security cameras at Venice’s Santa Lucia station yielded a recording of him sitting on the steps overlooking the Grand Canal ten minutes before he was spotted floundering in the water.

He appears to have jumped in voluntarily, probably as a response to the failure of his petition to the Italian government to be allowed to claim asylum and remain in the country. The local media said Sabally had previously been given a temporary permit [*Permesso di Soggiorno*] to stay in Italy but had travelled into Switzerland seeking work so that he could move closer to family in Mexico. He had then been returned to Italy by officials.

He was thrown several life preservers by the crew of a *Vaporetto* which approached him but does not seem to have made any attempt to use those devices to save himself. Apparently, the crew of those craft are expressly forbidden to leave them even to engage in a rescue. *La Nuova di Venezia e Mestre* reported that after viewing various videos of the event, the authorities would bring charges against a 35-year-old driver of a *motoscafo* belonging to the *Casinò di Venezia*, who had passed close to the drowning man but had not stopped to offer him any assistance. That failure to provide aid apparently violated the city’s codes of navigation. The facts of the case remain obscure even if we can be sure that the Grand Canal is not exactly the high seas.

Dino Basso, a local official in the Italian association of lifeguards, said: “I don’t want to blame anyone, but maybe something more could have been done to save him” (Snowdon). While Venice’s mayor, Luigi Brugnaro admonished anybody seeking to politicise the case and announced that funeral costs would be met from the city’s municipal fund and the body sent back to Africa.

Perhaps the basic philosophical kernel to be extracted from this tragedy which unfolded against a backdrop of riots in Italy’s detention and holding centres, is not the old Levinasian lesson about how a primal relation with and responsibility for alterity precedes ontology, but rather that those reactions

institutionalised in the law of the sea have ceased to operate, especially where the encounter with a drowning fellow human is mediated by a phone camera that occupies the hands of the potential rescuer and turns the drowning to which they refuse to bear witness, into an internet spectacle.

This example can be made part of a wider struggle to re-enchant humanism by endowing a stronger sense of *reciprocal* humanity in Europe’s proliferating encounters with vulnerable otherness. There is more to be salvaged from the water than wreckage and corpses. Europe’s relationship with its own shrinking civilisation is at stake in the decision to intervene as well as in the later lives of the survivors.

Similar lessons about the rhetoric of humanity and the need for new humanisms can doubtless be learned from other instances in which the issues of humanity and alterity have been refigured in emergency or disaster conditions by bold, generous acts of solidarity. They might also be considered to have a philosophical significance discernable outside of nationality, ethnicity, faith or racial hierarchy. It appears that the re-enchantment of the human, implicitly proposed here in abstract terms, is already underway.

These examples can provide an opportunity to enrich our understanding of the changes that characterise the postcolonial world. But there is even more than that at stake. Stories like these help us to find out which differences will be different enough to matter in a neoliberal era that is emphatically “diverse” and indulges its voracious appetite for exotica in inverse proportion to the ebbing of democracy and its vexed histories of hospitality and cosmopolitan hope.

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